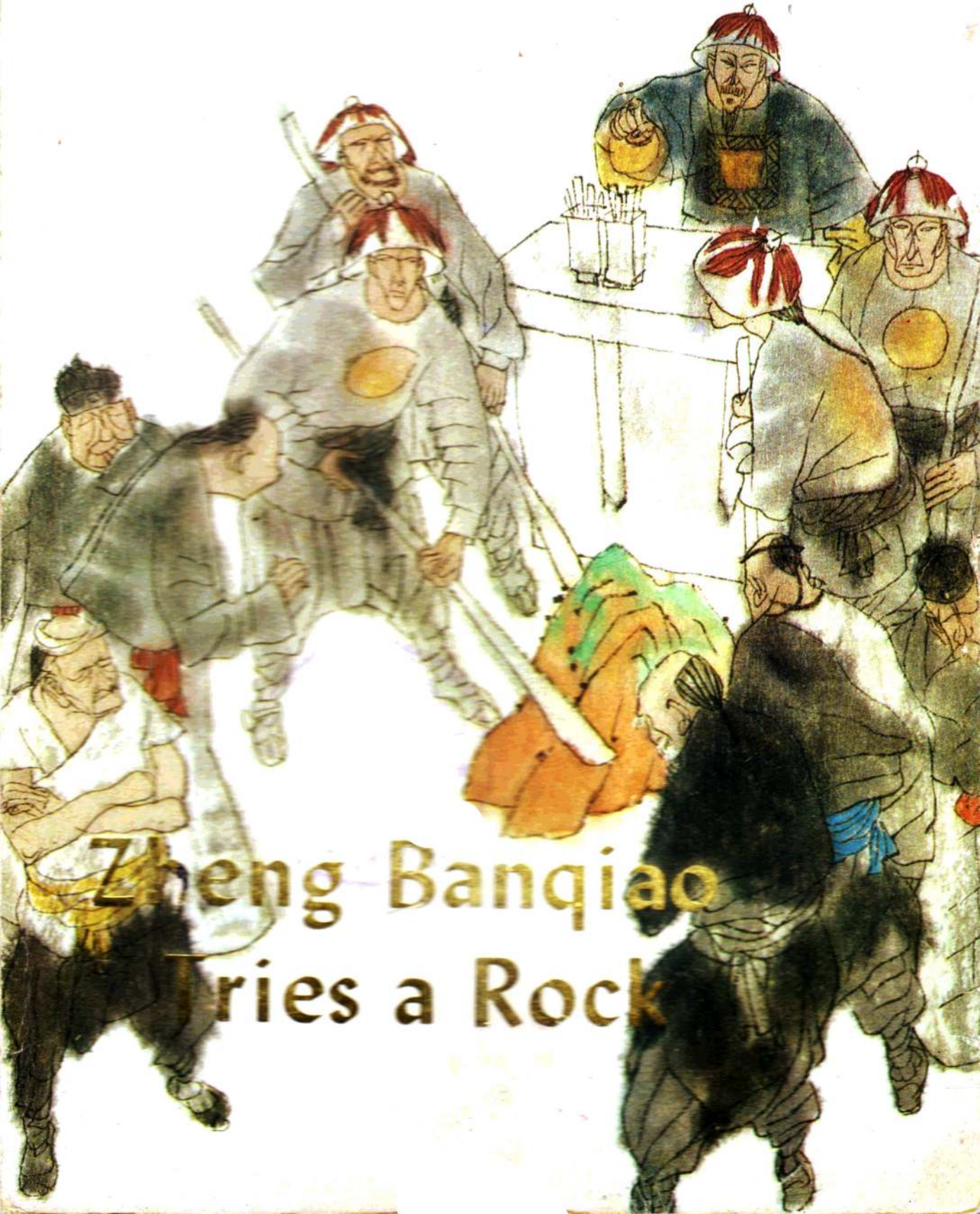
Stories about Ancient Chinese Literary and Art Figures



Zheng Banqiao Tries a Rock

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ZHENG BANQIAO
Tries a Rock

Adapted by Huan Shiming
Illustrated by Wang Mengqi
Designed by Zhang Xizhu

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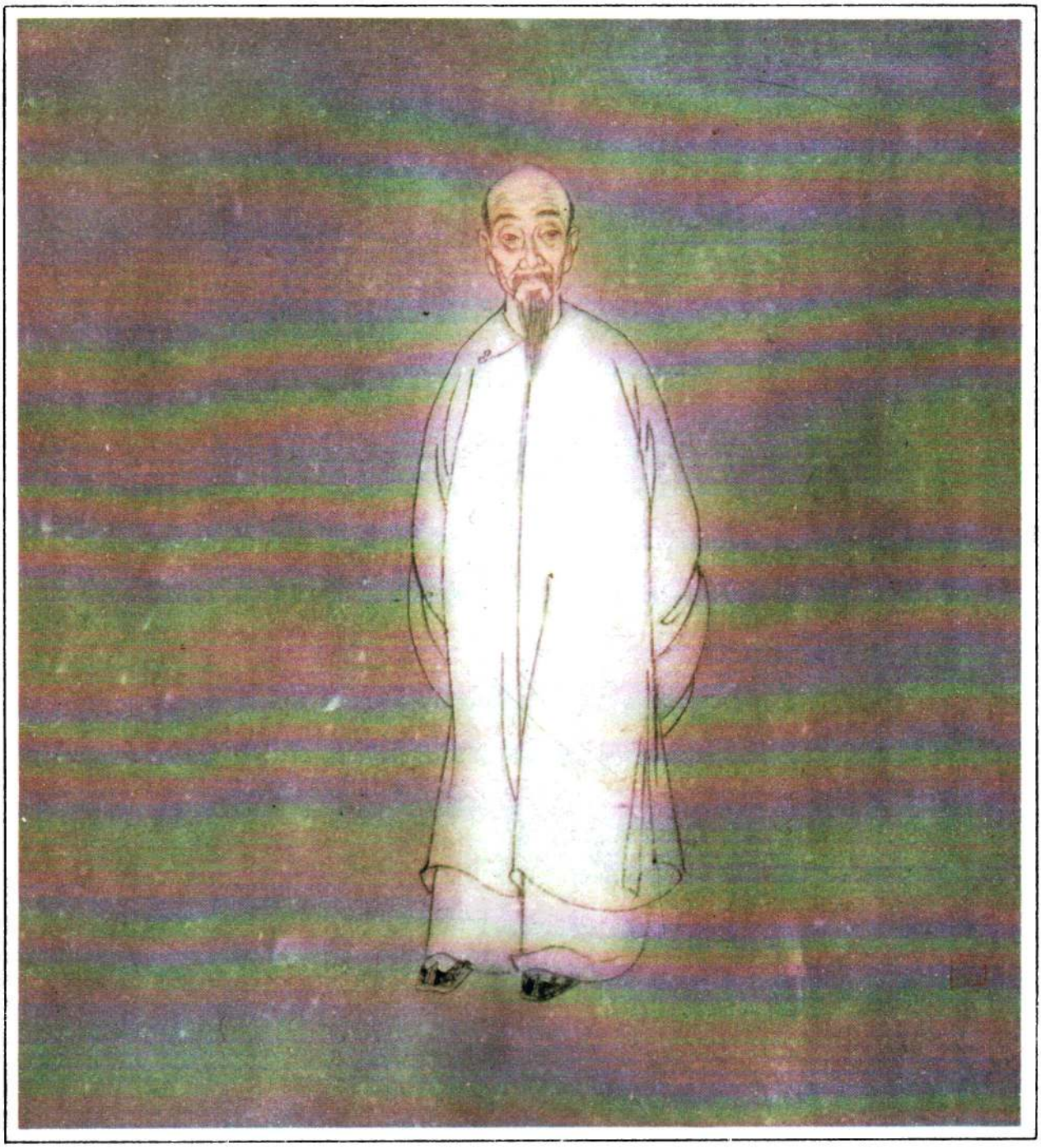
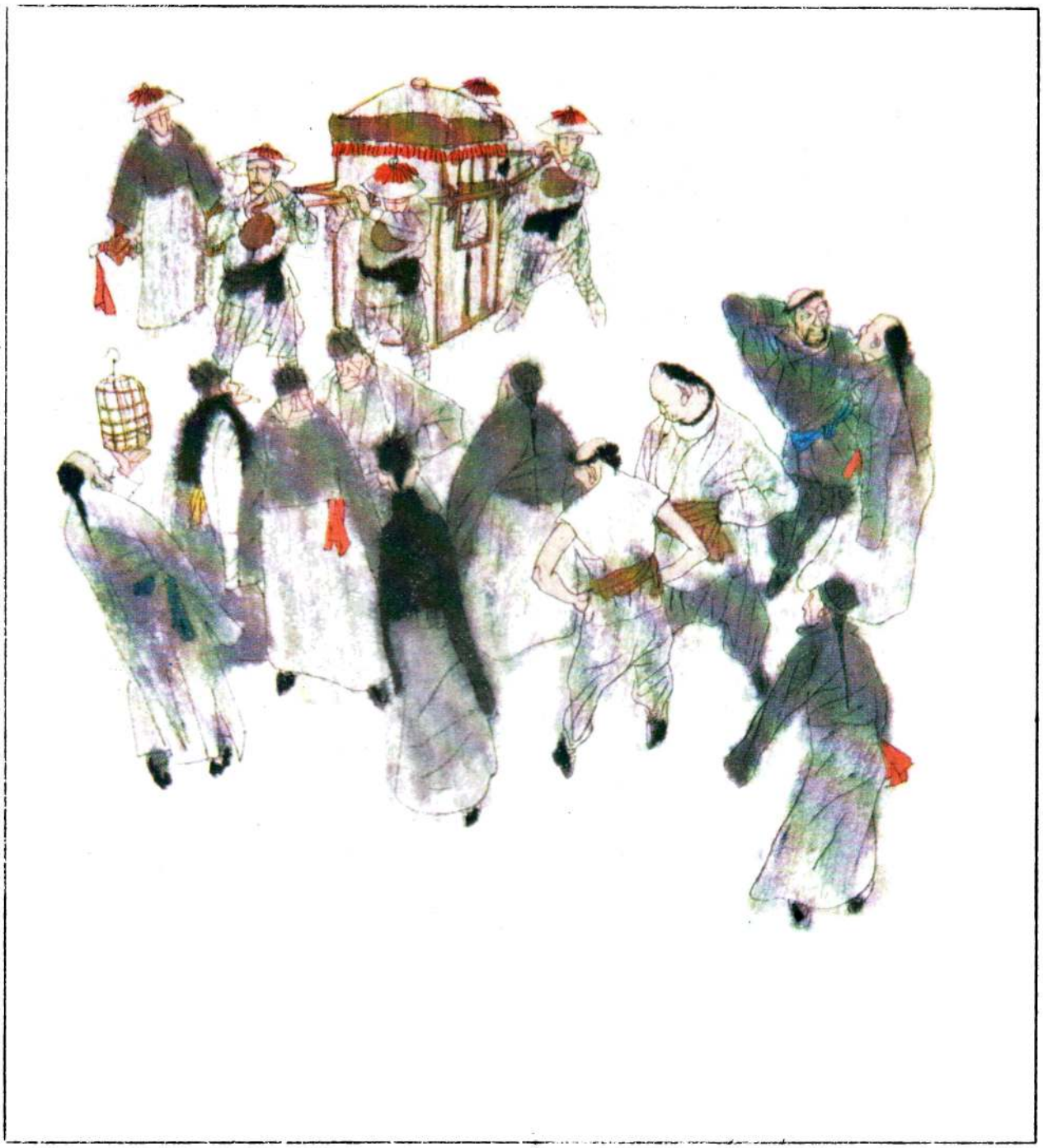
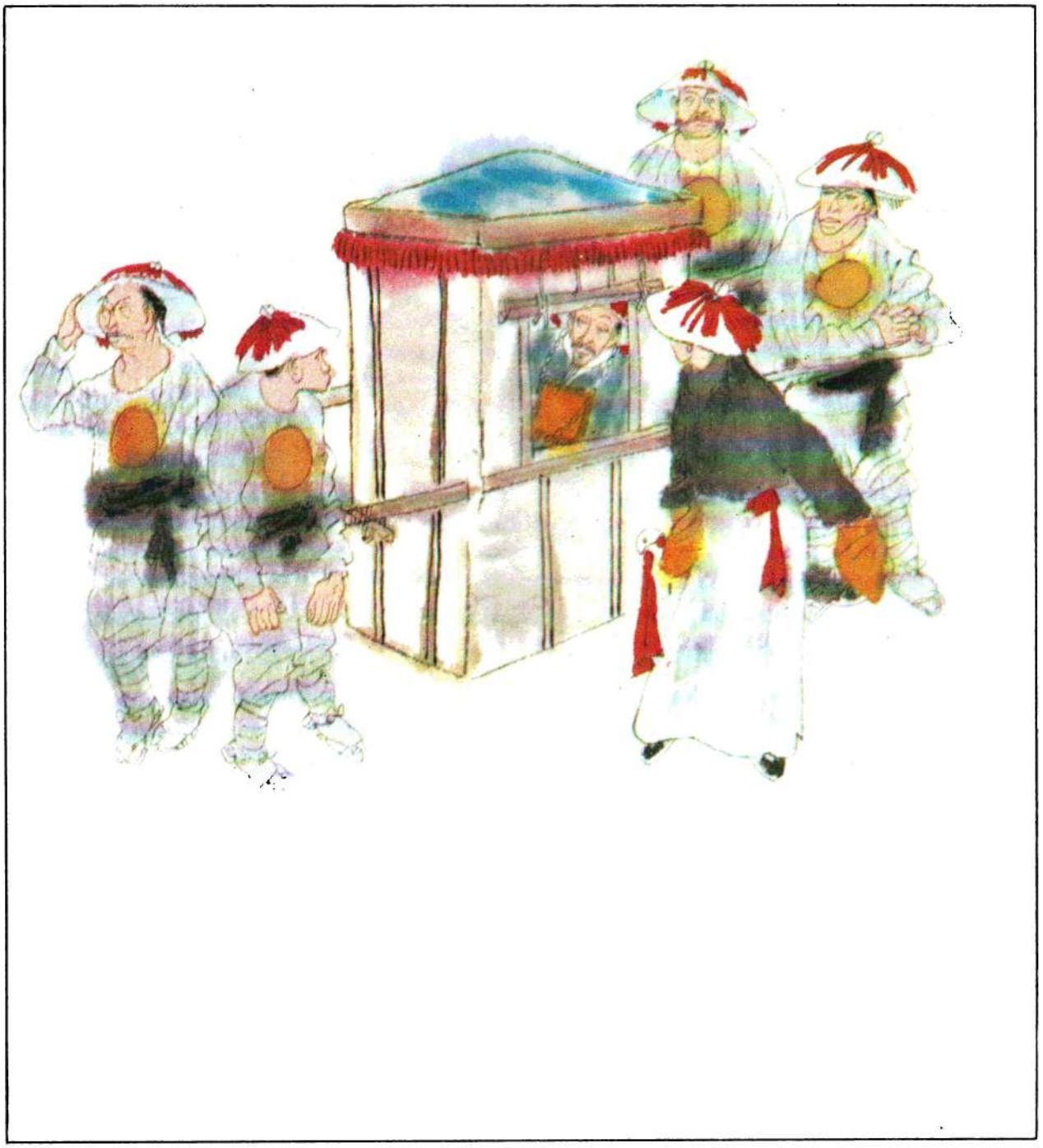


Zheng Banqiao (1693-1765) was a celebrated writer as well as painter and calligrapher of the Qing Dynasty. His painting and calligraphy were popular in his own time and greatly influenced later generations.

He also served as a magistrate and always showed concern for the poor, upheld justice and was never subservient to high officials. *Zheng Banqiao Tries a Rock* is one of the many folk legends about him.



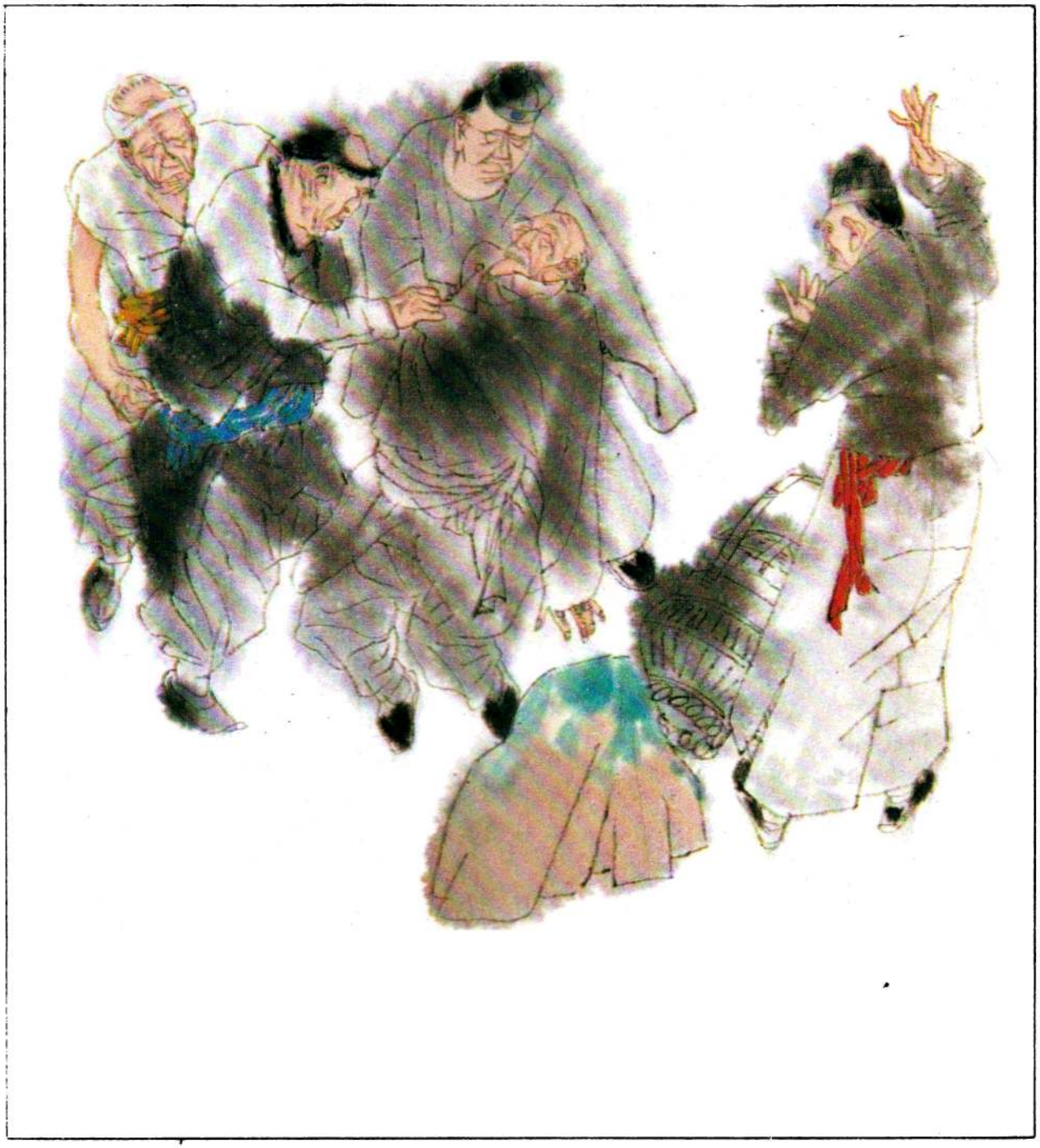
1. Zheng Banqiao was once the magistrate for Weixian County in Shandong Province. One day as he was on his way to his office, his sedan chair was stopped by a crowd of noisy people.



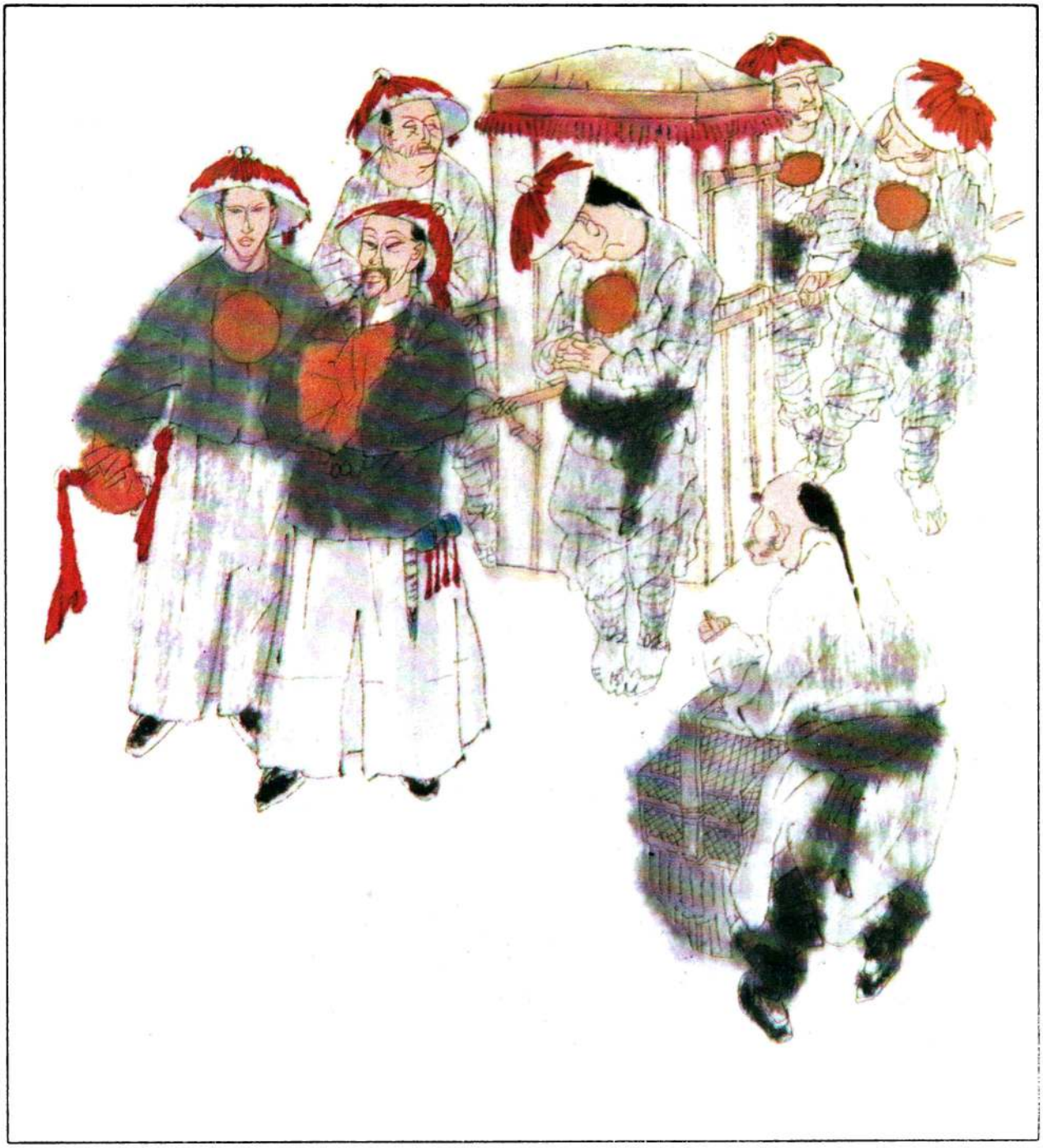
2. From the curtained window of his sedan, Zheng Banqiao could see that many people had gathered in front of the *yamen* (feudal office) gate and still more were coming from both ends of the street.

3. A glimpse of the scene told him that some local landlords and riffraff were trying to provoke some incident. As he was considering what to do, a big man nudged his way towards him, crying, "Welcome the County Lord!"

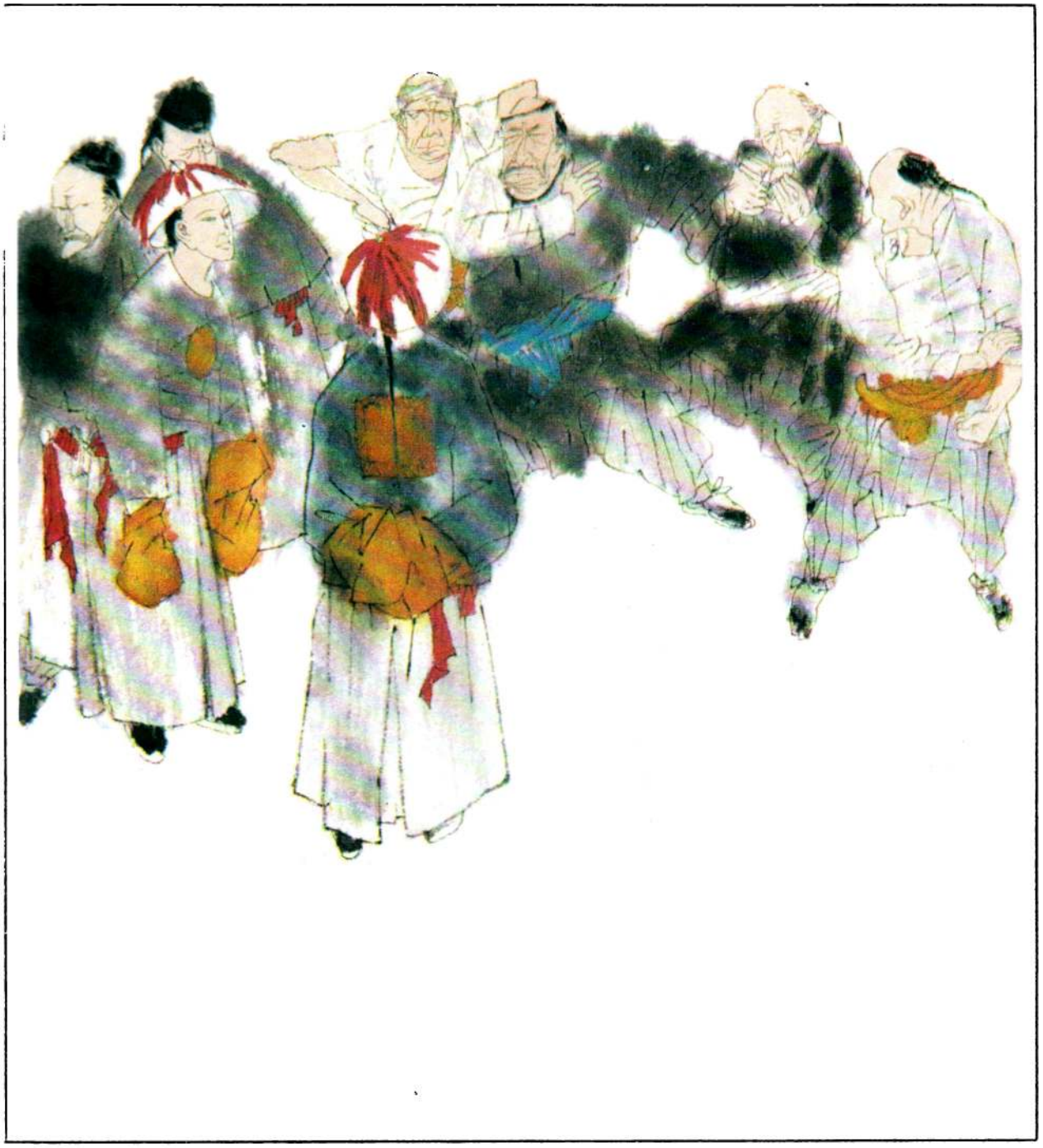
4. An old peddler who was selling porridge in the street hurried to get out of the way. But before he could move, the big man pushed him and he fell down and smashed his porridge jar on to a rock.



5. The rude fellow dragged the poor old man to his feet, scolding him for obstructing the magistrate.

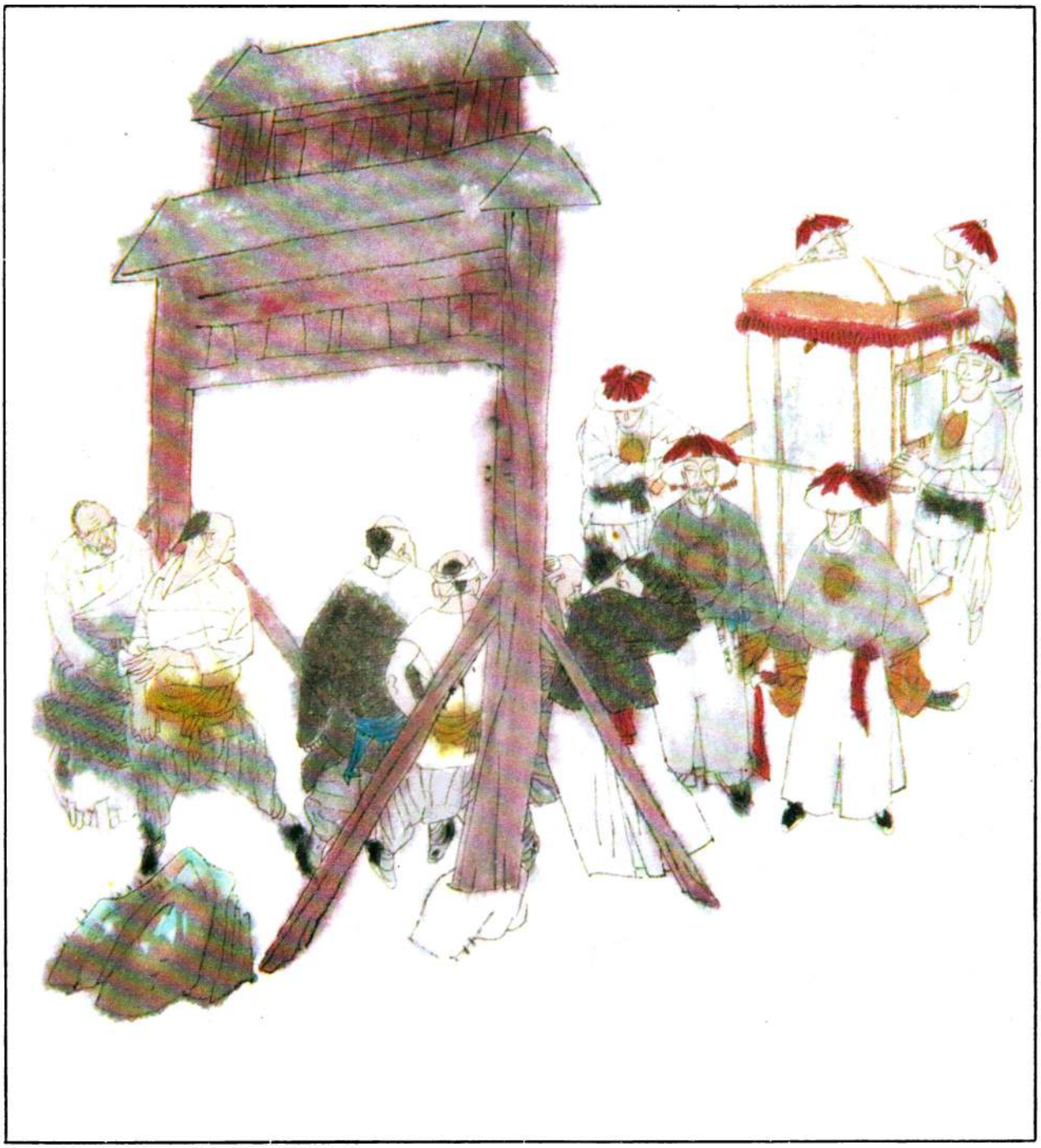


6. The accident attracted more people to the *yamen* gate. It quickly became mobbed. Knowing that there was no way to pass through to his office, Zheng Banqiao ordered his sedan chair to stop and he descended from it.



7. "Why are you making so much noise in front of my office?" he asked. "Excuse me, Sir ," said the big fellow, grabbing the porridge seller tightly, "we were here waiting for you, our County Lord, when this old man strode in and made some trouble."

8. The old man knelt down and cried plaintively, "That's not true! I have to support my whole family by selling porridge. How could I dare to make trouble? Just now, I was pushed down and my jar was smashed." He asked the magistrate to uphold justice.



9. Having witnessed the incident himself, Zheng Banqiao was sympathetic to the old man. But before he could speak, a fat landlord came up to him and bowed.

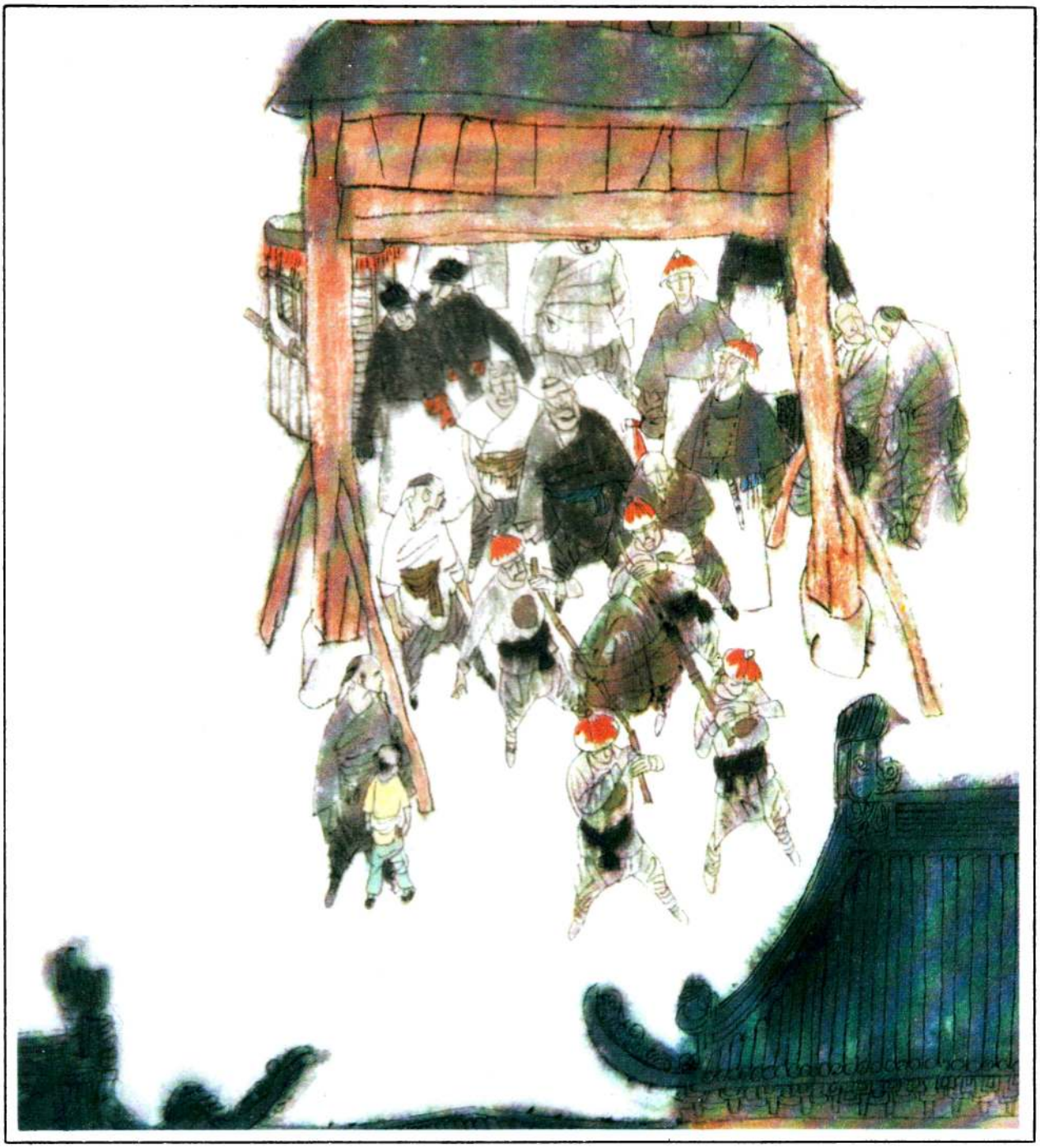
10. "The old man was tripped by a demon," he said. "You, father-and-mother-like magistrate, should rule in his favour."

"All right," said Zheng Banqiao, "since you are an eye witness, tell me who this demon is."

11. Pointing at the big rock by the road, the fat landlord said, "It is neither the sky, nor the earth. The demon is right there in that rock."

12. "I see," said the magistrate. "If it is true that the rock has broken the porridge jar, who would like to bear witness?" "I would," the trouble-makers answered in concert.

13. "Fine. I am going to put this wicked rock on trial." Zheng Banqiao then ordered the *yamen* men to carry the rock to his court.

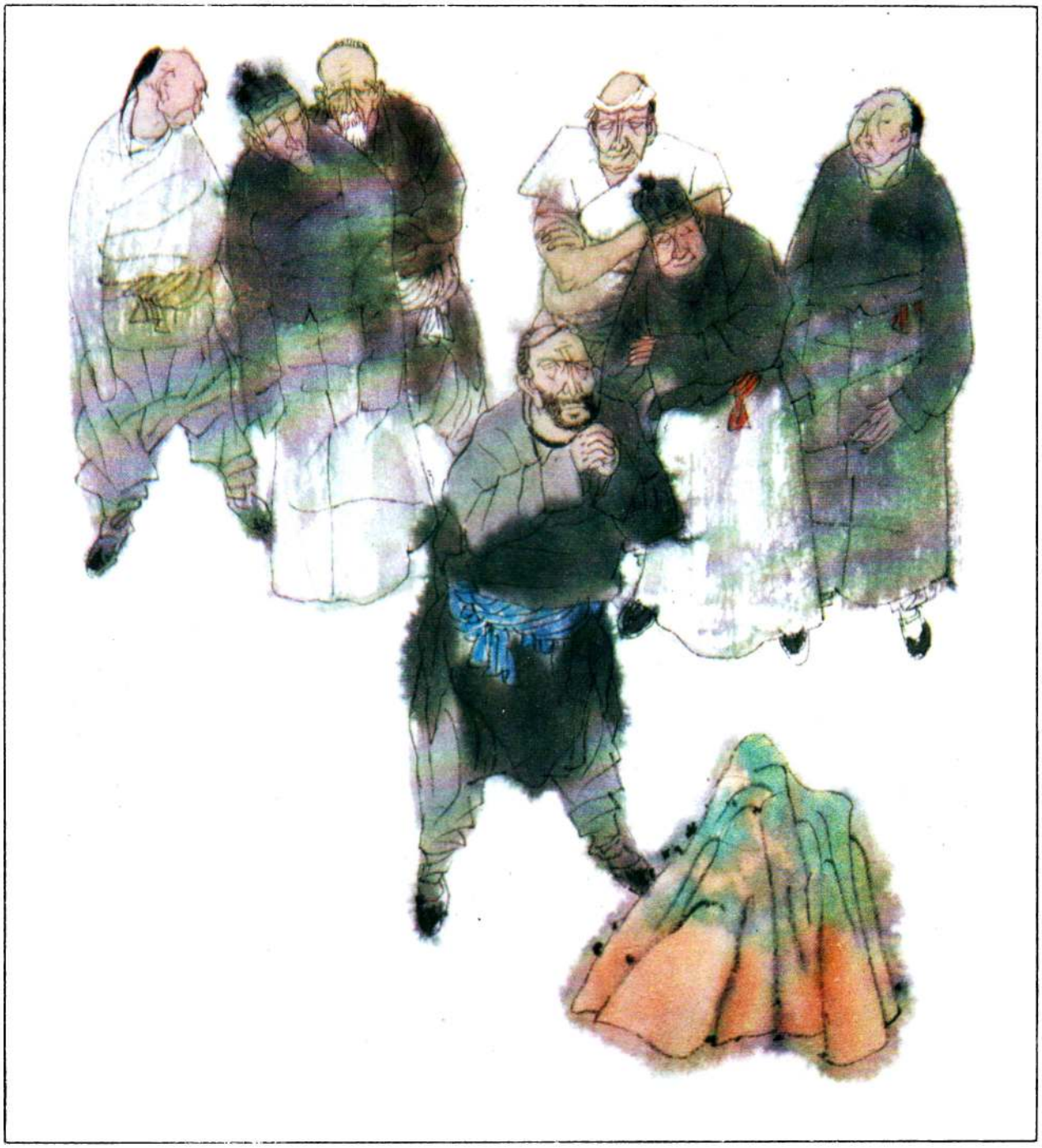


14. "Go into the court, everybody," he told the crowd, "and bear witness, please." The people all followed him into the *yamen*.

15. Zheng Banqiao began to question the blue rock. "You disgusting rock! Why did you break the old man's porridge jar? You must tell me the truth!"

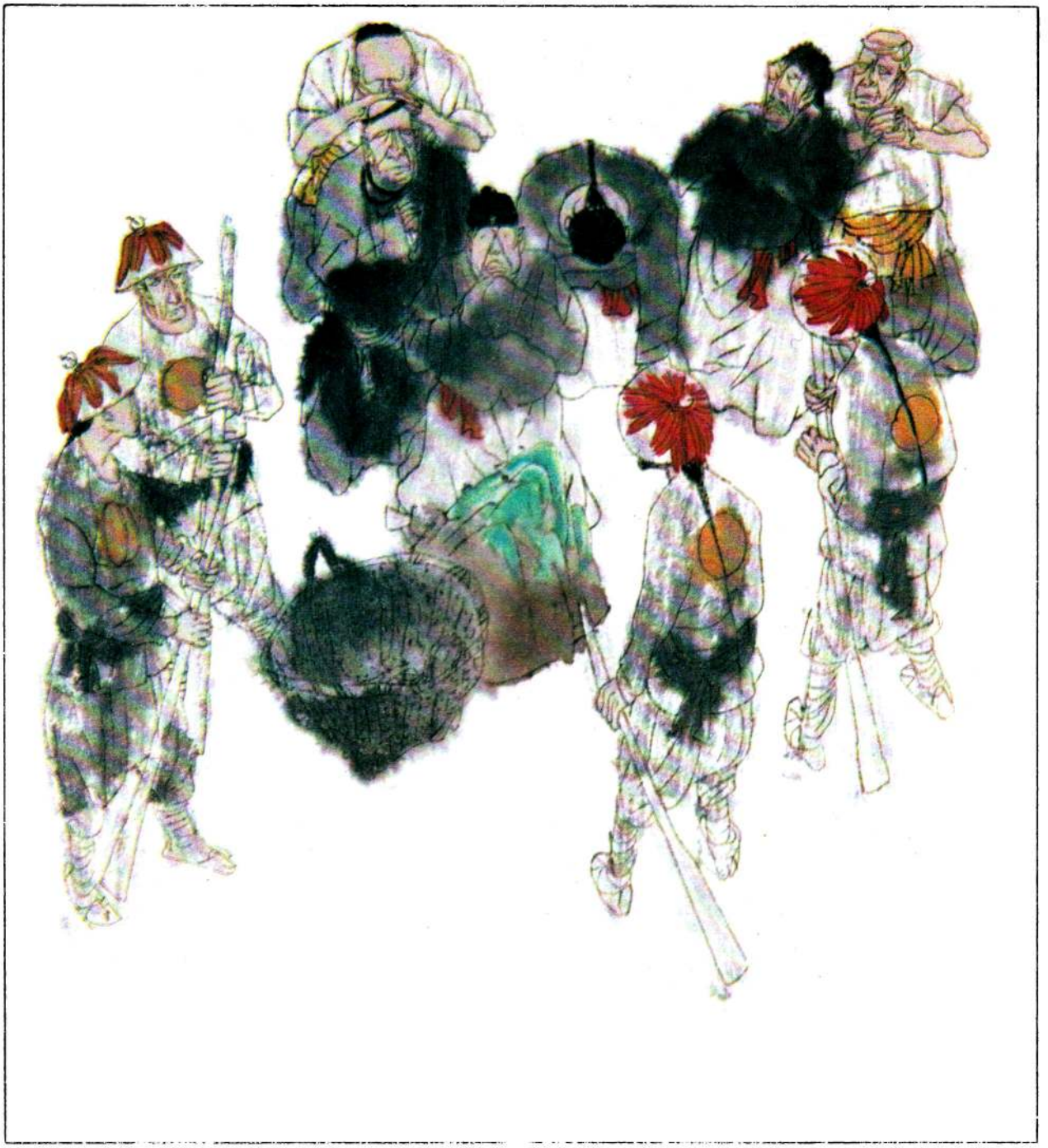
16. How could a rock speak? The court was still. "You don't confess?" He banged his gavel and then ordered, "Come and beat it 40 times!" The *yamen* men began beating the rock.

17. The witnesses — all landlords and riffraff — could not help but laugh. Zheng Banqiao glanced at them and asked, "Why do you laugh while I'm doing business?"



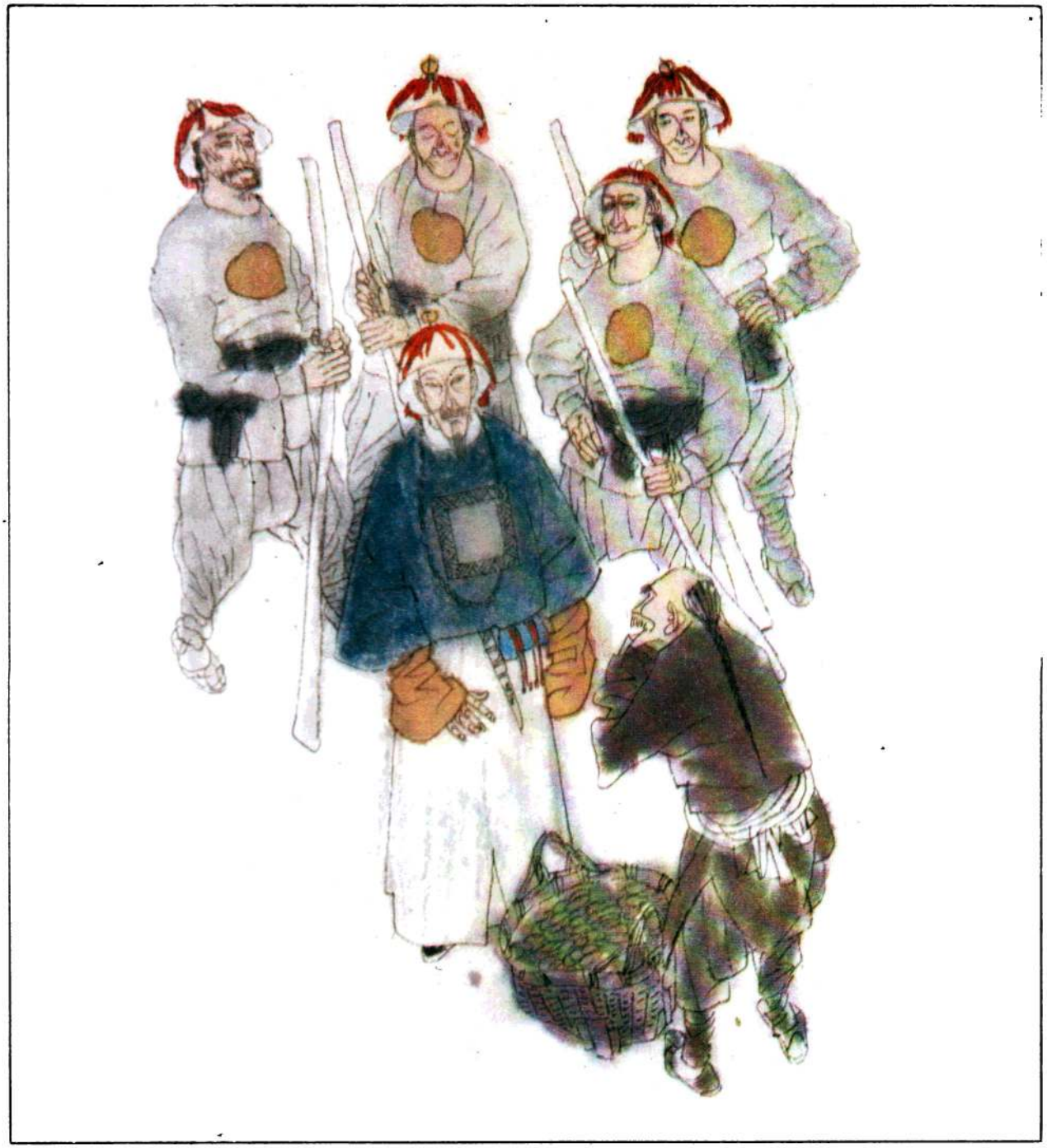
18. One of the riffraff walked forward and answered in a ridiculous voice, "Your Lord, the rock has no mouth, how can it speak? It won't speak even if you give it 400 lashes."

19. Zheng Banqiao banged his table and stood up, saying, "Since the rock has no mouth, it has no legs either. How could it smash the old man's porridge jar? It is obvious that you intend to fool me by bearing false witness." He then ordered his men, "Give them each 40 lashes."



20. The witnesses were all shocked. One by one they fell to their knees and begged for mercy. Zheng Banqiao told his men to pass around a large bamboo basket and said, "If you don't want to be beaten, pay for the privilege. Money or beating, choose for yourselves."

21. None of the bad elements chose the beating. They reluctantly took out their money and threw it into the basket. It was not long before the bamboo basket was full.



22. Pointing at the basket, Zheng Banqiao told the old man, "This is yours. Take it and feed your family."

Thereafter, everyone in the county came to know that the magistrate was a man of justice, and no landlord or riffraff dared to make any more trouble.

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